

Tens of thousands of UK university staff begin 14 days of strikes

Simon Whelan, Robert Stevens
20 February 2020

Up to 50,000 lecturers, technicians and library staff are beginning 14 days of strikes nationally, with a two-day stoppage Thursday and Friday. The strikes are the largest ever in the UK, with staff walking out at 74 universities.

A series of rolling actions over the next three weeks will culminate in a week-long strike beginning March 9.

University workers are opposing increased workloads, casualization and pay restrictions. They are resisting demands from employers that they increase their pension contributions.

The strike was called after the University and College Union (UCU) failed to reach agreement following months of talks with the employers' organisations—Universities UK (UUK) and Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). UUK represents universities over pensions and UCEA represents them in the pay and conditions dispute.

A ballot of UCU members exceeded the 50 percent turnout to reach the legal threshold. Eighty percent of voting members backed strikes over pensions, while 76 percent voted for strike action over pay and conditions.

The strikes show the determination of university workers to oppose the destruction of their pensions, pay, terms and conditions. The industrial action is the second this academic year, following an eight-day stoppage by staff at 63 institutions last November/December. In 2018, UCU members held a 14-day national strike against pension cuts at 64 institutions involving 50,000 lecturers and other university staff.

Reflecting the growing resolve of university employees to fight, 14 more universities passed the 50 percent turnout threshold required for industrial action than in November. Workers at the 24 major public

research Russell Group universities, the ex-polytechnics (the post-1992 universities) and at distance learning institutions, including the Open University, voted to strike.

The UCU said around a million students were affected during the strike last November. With 14 additional institutions, that number is set to leap by another 200,000.

From the moment the UCU leadership announced the strikes, up until the last minute on Wednesday, they were pleading with the employers to make an offer to avoid strike action. As it became clear that management were refusing to make any concessions, the UCU put out a statement Wednesday declaring, "Blame for strikes lays squarely at door of university heads."

University workers want the institutions to cover the cost of pension contribution rises that have been imposed on academic and other staff over the past year. After the refusal of the UCU to fight previous management attacks on pensions, staff now pay 9.6 percent of salary into their pension plan (up from eight percent in 2019). A typical university lecturer is paying about £30 a month more for the same retirement benefits.

Just ahead of the strike, UUK announced that 84 percent of 111 employers who responded to a consultation did not want to make a new offer to the union. A survey by UUK of its institutions found that four employers wanted to offer only an additional 0.5 percent in employer contributions, while 14 employers wanted to offer between 0.6 and one percent. Just two employers were willing to offer more than one percent.

Since 2009, the pay of staff has dropped by around 21 percent in real terms.

The UCEA made a new offer in late January, which UCU General Secretary Jo Grady described as "a big

step forward” though still falling short of the UCU’s demands. University employers aim to set sector-wide “expectations” around the use of casual contracts, gender and ethnicity pay gaps and workloads. But the proposals did not include any movement on a pay offer of just 1.8 percent.

The UCU Left faction—comprising members of a number of pseudo-left groups and dominated by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—describe the struggle by university workers as the “Four Fights” dispute because they claim four issues are at stake: casualisation, equality, pay and workload. They barely mention the fight to oppose the destruction of pension rights. In a statement last week, the UCU Left gave the 2018 dispute a one sentence mention, while declaring, “The USS dispute must be fought now because the future of the pension scheme is in the balance. Unless we fight to put it on a sustainable basis, it may not survive.”

The UCU Left betray their nervousness over the issue of pensions because it is such a sore point in the aftermath of the betrayal of the 2018 strike.

University workers face a concerted offensive on their pensions, pay and conditions because the UCU bureaucracy caved in and ended what was then the largest strike ever in higher education institutions. Even after staff voted to reject the cuts planned by the employers—including organizing a nationwide rebellion against the UCU leadership trying to enforce a sellout deal—the union bureaucracy, with the assistance of the UCU Left, finally pushed through a deal which led to huge cuts in pension provision after retirement.

By 2019, after eight years of attacks on their pension scheme, a typical USS member was being asked to pay £40,000 more into their pensions but will receive almost £200,000 less in retirement—leaving them £240,000 worse off in total.

The UCU Left never tires of promoting the UCU and calling on university workers to join it. But the UCU has never called all its 120,000 members out in a unified all-out stoppage and refuses to unite higher education staff with its substantial membership in the further education sector, who face the same onslaught on their pay, terms and conditions.

The 14-day action is deliberately fragmented, with UCU members at some institutions striking over both disputes, while at other universities workers are striking

on the basis of just pay and working conditions, and others just rising pension costs.

The role of the UCU and its pseudo-left backers in dissipating every struggle was seen last November when the strikes were limited to eight days, resulting in the national stoppage abruptly ending on December 4. This was to ensure that the strike did not clash with a December 12 general election that Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn wanted to win based on his demobilizing any struggle by the working class.

Had the Communications Workers Union defied the High Court’s move to rule a strike ballot of postal workers illegal, November’s higher education strike would have taken place at the same time as action by more than 100,000 postal workers. This would have represented a powerful movement against the employers and Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, who are determined to tear up all gains won by workers in decades of struggle.

UCU members must draw the lessons from their recent experiences at the hands of the UCU. The unions do not function as organisations that defend the interests of their members, but act to enforce the diktats of management.

Workers should wrest the struggle from the suffocating confines of the unions and establish rank-and-file committees that operate independently of the bureaucratic apparatus. They must actively seek and appeal for support from all sectors of workers in the education sector and unify the struggles of educators and students throughout the UK against the rapacious demands of the universities.

To discuss these urgent issues and to take the fight forward, we urge university staff and students to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wswp.org/contact](https://www.wswp.org/contact)